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Senate fire

CIA job: fences to mend

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Washington

A major fence-mending job in Congress awaits the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

The magnitude of that task became apparent during recent Senate debate on a "right-of-privacy" bill which passed eventually by a lopsided 79-4 vote.

The bill seeks to protect federal workers from "big brother"—nosiness in the form of intimate hiring questionnaires and so-called "lie-detector" tests, as well as other prying practices resented by employees.

As reported by the Senate Judiciary Committee, the measure would grant a partial exemption to the CIA and the National Security Agency (NSA). It would permit the two agencies' directors to use polygraph tests on job applicants when they could make a personal finding that the nation's security was at stake.

The bill's author, Sen. Sam J. Ervin Jr. (D) of North Carolina, had resisted this exemption. This in itself reveals a measure of CIA slippage since last year.

Showdown recalled

The last Senate showdown on the CIA and its operations occurred July 14, 1966. Sen. Eugene J. McCarthy (D) of Minnesota sought to enlarge the Senate's "CIA watchdog" committee to include members of the Foreign Relations Committee. Its membership has been restricted to senators on the Armed Services and Appropriations Committees.

The McCarthy motion lost then by a decisive 61-28 margin. But even at the time, some observers marveled at the size of the minority vote. More than a quarter of the members joined in the uprising.

When the McCarthy proposition came to a vote, conservatives like Senators Ervin, Roman L. Hruska (R) of Nebraska and Norris Cotton (R) of

These members held with the majority that to enlarge the "watchdog" group might endanger national security, the greater likelihood of a "weak link."

But today these three members have joined the 28 CIA critics — all of whom remain in the Senate. Retiring liberals like Paul H. Douglas, Ross Bass, and Maurine B. Neuberger weren't included in their number.

Roll call averted

On the other hand, some strong CIA supporters like A. Willis Robertson and Leverett Saltonstall have left the Senate. Their successors may not share their views.

The key issue in the Ervin bill—whether or not to allow the CIA and NSA a blanket exemption—didn't come to a vote. A compromise averted a roll call. Had a vote been recorded, Senator Ervin would probably have lost it. Yet it would have reflected a marked falloff from the backing accorded the CIA little more than a year ago.

What has prompted the shift of sympathy? Certainly one factor is the disclosure of widespread CIA use of foundations to gain information — through international student, labor, and cultural groups.

Probably more important, the CIA has irked some members by sharing details of its operations with the "watchdog" group while refusing to pass any of it on to other members.

One senator obviously miffed by this practice is Norris Cotton, who sits on the Appropriations Committee but not on the "watchdog" group.

Ervin chides CIA

During debate on the Ervin bill, Senator Cotton chided the CIA for having grown "very arrogant and very powerful." He added ominously that "all of the enemies of our country are not necessarily foreign enemies."

While noting the "undoubted service" of the CIA, the New Hampshire Senator warned of the danger "of the invasion of our country's liberties when we create within the government any kind of a Frankenstein monster that enjoys particular privileges of secrecy and exercises those privileges to such degree."

Sen. John Stennis (D) of Mississippi had earlier told members that "many, many millions of dollars" are granted each year to finance the security agencies. Yet members of the Appropriations Committee remain in the dark on the exact amount, according to Senator Cotton.

Those senators, the few who oversee the CIA, have rescued the CIA in the past. But the CIA may have to broaden that circle if it intends to maintain a friendly majority in the Senate in the years ahead.